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ABSTRACT

Although thanatologists agree that grieving is essential in adjusting to the loss of a loved one, numerous questions about what facilitates the grieving process remain. To examine the relationship between funeral and post-funeral ritual and grief adjustment, 50 widowed persons (47 females, 3 males) were interviewed and completed two life satisfaction and self-esteem questionnaires. Data were categorized into three funeralization rituals: pre-funeral; funeral; and post-funeral. An analysis of the results showed that more than half of the respondents reported having a funeral service for their spouse (56 percent), while 16 percent held a memorial service in conjunction with cremation, 14 percent held a memorial service, 6 percent had the remains cremated, and 4 percent held both a funeral and a memorial service. An average of 6 years had passed between the spouse's death and the interview. Only post-funeral rituals were associated with the two attitude measures. Specifically, feelings about family, finances, and health were directly related to rituals involving responding to expressions of sympathy and post-funeral help and sorting and disposing of the deceased's personal effects. Future research should focus on the evaluation of interventions as well as the causal relationship between ritual and adjustment. (BL)

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UNDERSTANDING FUNERALIZATION AND POST-FUNERALIZATION RITUALS: THE FACILITATION OF GRIEF WORK

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SUMMARY REPORT

UNDERSTANDING FUNERALIZATION AND POST-FUNERALIZATION RITUALS: THE FACILITATION OF GRIEF WORK

"... the rituals that surround death serve to facilitate closure by offering survivors a social framework for coping with the fact of death" (DeSpelder & Strickland; The Last Dance, 1983.)

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although writers in the field of thanatology agree that grieving is essential in adjusting to the loss of a loved one, there remain numerous questions and even disagreements about what facilitates the grieving process. Traditionally, ritual has been an important element of the leave-taking process and our funeral customs were the primary source of this ritual. The rituals themselves are generally confined to those elements immediately surrounding the death beginning with the notification of death and ending with a gathering for food and social interaction after the committal service. More recently, however, there has been a trend away from elaborate funerals and towards simpler and shorter services with memorial services instead of funerals becoming more common. A few thanatologists make some connections between ritual and grieving but none have stated which rituals may be more important than others.

In addition to the funeralization process there are other leave-taking rituals which have not been identified and therefore have not been studied to determine their impact on grief adjustment. These are the more private rituals which take place in the weeks, months and even years following a death. They include answering sympathy cards, sorting and disposing of personal effects of the deceased, removing the wedding band, and visiting the gravesite. We believe these activities are ritualistic in nature because they serve to accomplish closure and acceptance of the finality of a loss.

A primary reason for conducting the present study of the relationship between funeral and post-funeral ritual and grief adjustment was to develop a better understanding of those factors which affect or facilitate grief work and the outcome of bereavement. A second aim was to determine if specific rituals were more important than others, such as funeral versus post-funeral; or whether the number of rituals in a given category was significant. The post-funeral rituals were of particular interest because they have not been given sufficient attention in the current body of literature and have not been adequately defined. If a significant relationship were to be demonstrated to exist between post-funeral ritual and grief adjustment, the implications for the role of funeral directors, grief counselors, death educators, and the family and friends of the bereaved would become more focused.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

America's funeral practices came into question some years ago with the publication of Jessica Mitford's An American Way of Death (Mitford, 1963). Mitford's purpose was not to discredit the value of ritual in coming to terms with the death of a loved one but to bring into question the way in which disposal of the deceased was handled by the funeral industry. The effect however, seems to have been to discourage funerals and the accompanying rituals altogether.

Despite this trend, research and introspective writing regarding the rituals involving death have reported the relative value of funeral customs in facilitating the grieving process. Wilcox and Sutton (Wilcox & Sutton, 1977) state: "Ritual makes sense of death by placing it in the context of a world view.... As the distance from one's own death increases and the right to mourn is taken away, the ability to 'make sense' of death breaks down and there is growing dissatisfaction with the ritual that supports that rationalization" (p. 163). This view is supported by Gorer (Gorer, 1965) who claimed that the contemporary decline in accepted ritual and religious guidance after bereavement is responsible for "...a very considerable amount of maladaptive behavior" (p.17). Gorer further observed that the decline in ritual is evidence of our "death denying" society. It is not uncommon for those central to grieving, often the clergy, to attempt to keep deep feelings of grief restrained and thus mourners are left with the necessity of completing grieving during a sometimes extended post-funeral period. Folta and Deck (Folta & Deck, 1974) illustrate the potential value of unrestrained, and in many cases, ritualized grieving among American blacks participating in traditional funeral ceremony. In a significant work focused on death and dying, Barrett, in Signs (Barrett, 1977) suggested that "...bereavement is less distressing in cultures which sanction elaborate public displays of grief" (p. 858). Since we do not have nationally prescribed mourning rituals in this country, appropriate mourning behavior does not have a consensus of opinion or approval. Wilcox and Sutton (1977) support this belief: "... ambiguity with regard to 'proper' mourning in the U.S. probably contributes to the difficulties of early widowhood" (p. 163). Changes in our attitudes towards the funeral are also reflected by Parkes (Parkes, 1972) who stated: "...the funeral is no longer an opportunity for the unrestrained exhibition of public grief" (p.242).

In a study of 800 visits to bereaved families (Kraeer, 1981) the question of the value of funeral ritual was dramatically demonstrated. The findings indicated that "... of those who had no services (direct disposition) 34% showed signs of arrested progress in grief recovery, with chronic anger, fear, depression,

and social withdrawal manifesting themselves; 22% of those who had some kind of formalized rites, limited in nature, were unsuccessful in the reorientation process; while only 12% of those having full funeral service had 'hang ups' in working through to new and/or modified life relationships" (p. 254).

There is disagreement among thanatologists, however, regarding the value of the funeral. Sullivan, citing a 1971 London study, (Sullivan, 1981) states: "The issue of the positive, psychological value of the funeral has been raised because the funeral service takes place too soon after the death, during the first week of bereavement, to constitute a successful rite of passage" (p. 182). A similar observation is made by Keith (Keith, 1981) what states: "There are ... repeated criticisms of contemporary funeral practice as being a meaningless and valueless element.... These criticisms are leading many survivors to anticipate that post-death activities without ceremonial or ritualistic form can be eliminated without any detrimental effects on the resolution of acute grief" (p. 204).

It is interesting to note that Parkes (Parkes, 1972), in a classic study of bereavement, makes a direct reference to the leave-taking rituals engaged in by the survivors as a determinant affecting the outcome of bereavement but does not distinguish the importance of pre- or post-funeral rituals.

It seems important from this review that there is need for more study of the relationship between the degree of ritualization accompanying funeralization and grieving. It is our view that little research has been conducted regarding the meaning of funeral rituals before, during and after the funeralization process. We contend that the formal acknowledgement of expressions of sympathy, the acts of sorting through and disposing of the personal effects of the deceased, the removal of the wedding band and making visits to the gravesite all constitute a part of the leave-taking process. It is, therefore, our hypothesis that a significant relationship exists between the types of ritual practices and the degree of adaptive grieving achieved by the survivors. Our intent was to conduct exploratory heuristic research to discover whether these relationships do indeed exist.

III. METHODS AND PROCESS

As previously stated, the basic purpose for this research was to determine whether there was any relationship between pre-, during-, and post-funeral rituals and adaptive grieving. Especially significant was a closer look at the importance post-funeral rituals might have in facilitating grieving.

To carry out this research, 50 widowed persons (47 women and 3 men) were interviewed regarding what occurred just before, during and after their spouse's funeral. Questions related to the rituals followed and two life-satisfaction and self-esteem questionnaires were a part of the interview.

The information collected during interviews was then computer analyzed to gain a description of the persons interviewed, the rituals they followed before, during and after the funeral, and their level of life-satisfaction and self-esteem. The latter two measures were used to gain a general understanding of how well the individuals had adjusted to the death of their spouse and how the felt their lives were now.

IV. RESULTS

1. The average age for individuals participating in the interviews was 55 1/2 years of age with the youngest being 32 and the oldest being 78.

2.. As noted above, there were 47 women and 3 men in the survey sample.

3. More than half reported that they held a funeral service for their spouse (56%), while 16% held a memorial service in conjunction with cremation, 14% held a memorial service, 6% had the remains cremated, and 4% held both a funeral and a memorial service.

4. The cause of the deceased's death was, in most instances, similar to the leading causes of death in America: 36% died of some type of heart disorder; 24% died of cancer; 14% died in accidents (the 4th leading cause in America); 6% died of a stroke (3rd cause in America); 4% died from arteriosclerosis, 2% from suicide, and 14% from other causes.

5. It had been an average of 6 years since the spouse's death when the interview was conducted with the most recent being just two years and the most remote being 15 years.

6. Three "funeralization ritual" categories were used to determine whether pre, during, or post-rituals had the greatest impact on grief adjustment. These three categories were formulated by the use of a checklist of events that might occur at different periods after a death.

A. PRE-FUNERAL RITUALS included: 1) placing a notice of the death in the newspaper, church bulletin, etc.; 2) having an informal gathering of family and friends soon after the death occurred; having a wake, a rosary service, a prayer service, and/or a communion service with the deceased present prior to the funeral or memorial; the widow being involved in

the selection of the casket, the burial/commital site, and other funeral/memorial details. In all 15 pre-funeral rituals were identified. The average number of pre-funeral rituals was 6.4 with 8 individuals reporting 7 rituals. The lowest number reported was 2, the highest was 12.

B. FUNERAL RITUALS included: 1) holding a funeral or memorial service; 2) having prayers, music, communion, a "high mass," as a part of that service; 3) persons offering words of comfort to the bereaved; 4) the widowed person making decisions regarding the rituals followed during the funeral; 5) the widowed person feeling satisfied with the funeral/memorial. There were 22 funeral/memorial rituals specified for this category. The average number of funeral rituals was 5 with 10 individuals reporting this number. The lowest number reported was 1 and the highest was 12.

C. POST-FUNERAL RITUALS included: 1) a post-funeral/ memorial gathering of family and friends; 2) the widowed individual remaining throughout that gathering; 3) food being a part of the post-funeral gathering; 4) responding to sympathy cards, flowers, prayer offerings, money, and other favors; 5) writing letters to inform friends, relatives and acquaintances of the death; 6) sorting and disposing of the deceased's personal effects; and 7) visiting the grave site. There were 18 post-funeral rituals identified for this category of ritual. The average number of rituals reported was 3.3 with 16 persons indicating 3 post-funeral rituals and 15 reporting 4. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of all respondents reported 3 or more post-funeral rituals with 6 being the maximum number reported. In addition a statistical test demonstrated that the number of persons reporting post-funeral rituals was significantly different than what might have been predicted when compared with a mathematical prediction.

D. STATISTICAL COMPARISONS OF RITUALS AND GRIEF ADJUSTMENT SCORES indicated that only POST-FUNERAL RITUALS seemed to be associated with scores on the two attitude instruments. This finding indicates that, while a prediction of what rituals cause better grief adjustment can not be made, it does mean that post-funeral rituals and grief adjustment are somehow related. Specific findings indicated that feelings about family, finances and health were directly related to rituals involving responding to expressions of sympathy and post-funeral help as well as sorting and disposing of the deceased's personal effects.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Several findings of note were made by this study:

FIRST, while statistical outcomes did not consistently support the notion, POST-FUNERAL RITUALS appear to be the most salient in regard to grief adjustment after death of a spouse. Several sub-scales of the Cavan Adjustment Scale indicated a significant association with variables associated with post-funeralization rituals. This finding supports our original hypothesis that rituals following the days of the funeral itself play a significant role in grief work. While not definitive enough to draw a conclusion of cause and effect, the data do support the heuristic intent of the research and do support future study of the relationships that probably do exist. The data do not support a similar conclusion regarding pre- and during-funeral rituals.

SECOND, the Affect Balance scale, while reasonably valid in this instance, did not produce scores useful in statistical analyses. The items would appear to elicit socially desirable responses and thus is judged ineffective in measuring grief adjustment. The Cavan Scale would appear to be susceptible to similar response biases but did produce some degree of differentiation among respondents. The family, financial, and health scales were especially useful in showing differences among respondents based upon post-funeral rituals.

THIRD, even though the measures appeared to be somewhat transparent to respondents, the heuristic value of the research is borne out by the few statistically significant results obtained. We are ready to conclude that the post-funeralization rituals cited for study DO HAVE a significant relationship to grief adjustment and that post-funeralization rituals, as opposed to pre- and during-funeralization rituals seem to be most significant to grief work.

FINALLY, this research has provided sufficient evidence to recommend the pursuit of more refined cause and effect research on the topic of post-funeralization ritual and grief work. In order to accomplish this, however, the following recommendations should be followed:

A. Non-obtrusive measures of grief adjustment must be developed that preclude the collection of socially desirable responses. This would most likely mean the development of an observer rating system that allows for objective judgments to be made during the provision of post-funeral grief counseling.

B. A more systematic method of cataloging post-funeral rituals should be developed to allow a complete and accurate listing soon after the grief work begins. This will allow for more rigorous research and will provide greater insight into the significance of specific rituals under specific grieving conditions.

C. Research that includes intervention, a planned counseling and grieving facilitation, as a treatment variable will provide significant insight into the value of particular modes of grief work help. The present research has shown that it is the post-funeral phase that tends to be the most facilitative but it does not demonstrate what particular rituals have the greatest impact on the grieving process.

D. Factors related to the quality of the respondents relationships with the deceased will also provide important information about the necessity for grief work and its potential for adjustment. These can be studied in conjunction with post-funeral rituals in an assessment based on the extent of grieving being experienced.

V. SUMMARY

In summary, the research reported here dealt with an exploratory study of funeralization rituals and the possible association these rituals have with grief adjustment.

Fifty widowed persons, all former clients of the Widowed and Family Grief Counseling Service of the Center for Gerontology, University of Oregon, were selected at random to be interviewed regarding the funeral rituals they carried out in conjunction with the death of their spouse. These individuals tended to be mostly female (47), were middle-aged (average age 55.6 years), and had been widowed for an average of 6 years.

Subjects were asked to provide interviewers with information regarding the pre-, during, and post-funeral rituals by answering specific questions and by talking generally about the days preceding and after their spouses funeral. Grief adjustment was measured using two scale developed to measure attitudes and general life satisfaction. The Cavan Scale and the Affect-Balance Scale, two standard measures used in gerontological research and having accepted reliability and validity were utilized in assessing grief adjustment.

The general finding of the study, designed to explore a relatively new and unknown area of grief work, was that there is some relationship between post-funeral rituals and grief adjustment. This finding supported the ideas originally presented by the researchers and supports the notion of further study in this area. Pre- and during rituals did not appear to be significantly related to grief adjustment, another idea supported by the researchers, and thus would not appear to be of future interest.

These findings indicate that counselors, lay persons involved in providing psychological support to the bereaved, and persons facing grief would be well advised to consider post-funeral rituals as beneficial in helping grief adjustment. These findings also indicate that without an active pursuit of "ritual leave-taking" the bereaved person may not successfully work through post-widowhood grief and thus possibly experience further mental health concerns.

Finally, it is recommended that further research be conducted to explain more clearly the types and nature of post-funeral rituals in conjunction with grief work. To do this less socially influenced measures of grief adjustment must be discovered or developed and more refined indicators of post-funeral rituals need to be developed. Conducting grief work and "ritual leave-taking" interventions in conjunction with research that both evaluates the effectiveness of that intervention and the causal relationship that may exist between ritual and adjustment would appear to be the next logical step in exploring this very meaningful aspect of the grieving process.

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